

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
DEBORAH L. THOMAS
Medical Lab Technician, Career, Air Force
2007

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Thomas, Deborah L., (1952-). Oral History Interview, 2007.

User Copy: 2 sound cassette (ca. 75 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 2 sound cassette (ca. 75 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Abstract:

Deborah Thomas, a Green Bay, Wisconsin native, discusses her career as a medical lab technician in the Air Force from 1972 to 1996. Thomas talks about joining in order to use the G.I. Bill and her family's response to her enlistment. She describes basic training at Lackland Air Force Base (Texas), technical school at Sheppard Air Force Base (Texas), a combat training exercise in the "wilds" of Texas, and specialized medical laboratory training at Sheppard Air Force Base. Thomas reports she was the first female student to receive Phase Two training at the Medical Center in Keesler Air Force Base (Mississippi), describes her duties in the lab, and speaks of encounters there with Vietnamese pilot students, whom she had difficulty communicating with, and POWs returning from Vietnam. She discusses her assignment to Incirlik Air Base (Turkey) during the Turkish invasion of Cyprus and, after hostilities ended, being questioned by some Turkish National Police members during an off-base sight-seeing trip. Thomas explains why she reenlisted. While on assignment to the Philippines, she recalls serving as a bailiff at a court-martial and going into the backcountry with the Medical Civic Action Program (MEDCAP). She talks about assignment to a NATO base in Izmir (Turkey), keeping an eye out for European inmates of Turkish prisons, seeing Russian ships spying outside the American Consulate, and, while living in an apartment across from Izmir's Governor, making his bodyguards nervous with her odd-hours work schedule. Thomas describes how promotions work in Air Force ranks and analyzes her experience with the system. She details her assignment to Eielson Air Force Base (Alaska) where the medical lab an unqualified person in charge was causing staffing problems. She describes taking over responsibilities, earning the lab accreditation from the College of American Pathologists, being promoted by a four-star general, and taking arctic survival classes. Thomas states she did not play politics enough to be promoted above Master Sergeant and so, according to the Total Objective Plan for Career Airmen Personnel (TOPCAP), she was retired. She examines the management structures and implementation of Total Quality Management in the medical corps. Thomas analyzes the difficulties caused by more women entering the military, including child care problems for deploying parents, difficulty in stationing increased numbers of married military members at the same base, women being excluded from certain duties, and lack of housing facilities during integration. She reflects on changes in the Air Force over her time of service, such as clothing changing from dresses to fatigues. After retirement,

Thomas describes furthering her education, joining American Legion Post 539, and keeping in touch with friends from service.

Interviewed by Terry MacDonald, 2007.

Transcription by Cathy Cox, Wisconsin Court Reporter, 2007.

Abstract by Susan Krueger, 2009.

Interview Transcript:

Terry: This is an interview with Deborah L. Thomas, who served with the United States Air Force as a career Air Force military personnel, and served from 1972 to 1996. The interview is being conducted at approximately 10:00 a.m. [REDACTED] Green Bay, Wisconsin, on the following date of March 24th, 2007, and the interviewer is Terry MacDonald.

Debbie, can you tell us a little bit about yourself before you entering the military service?

Thomas: Well, I was born in December 1952, Green Bay, Wisconsin. I was a graduate of Green Bay East High School, the class of '71. I joined the Air Force in February of 1972.

Terry: Did you have any brothers and sisters?

Thomas: Yes. I've got—three sisters and two brothers. Both of my brothers are 20-year veterans of the Air Force, also. One of 'em was nuclear missile maintenance, and then the other was avionics on the F-15s.

Terry: Were they older brothers?

Thomas: No, they were younger. In fact, my one brother that's three years younger than me, he—he was going to join the Army. They wanted him to fly helicopters in Vietnam. And at that time, the life expectancy of helicopter pilots in Vietnam were not very—very good. So uh, I came home on leave and talked him out of the Army and into the Air Force, which kind of made my father very perturbed. 'Cause he was former Army, and he didn't like the idea of the Air Force. He used—I guess in Korea they used to call the uh, Air Force Zoomies. (laughs) But my younger brother, he said he was going to join the Air Force when he grew up—or excuse me—he was going to join the Army when he grew up. But uh, this time I didn't exert any kind of influence on him, and he joined the Air Force on his own.

Terry: When you got out of high school then, what *made* you join the Air Force? What was the idea behind going into the service?

Thomas: Well—you know everyone thinks they're going to go to college after graduation. And, as the oldest of six kids, there really wasn't a lot of money. And after a two and a half month stay with my aunt and uncle out in Philadelphia, helping take care of the family, I decided that this is no way to earn money to go to college. And so I ended up enlisting in the Air

Force, and it was basically for the GI Bill. I—my original intention was to spend four years in the military, and collect my GI Bill and um, you know go from there.

Terry: So what did your parents think when you told them that you were going to join up?

Thomas: My father didn't like it. He was uh—he thought that if I was going to go in service I should go in the Army. At that time that uh, I was considering the military, there was a program in the Army, where they would send you to Walter Reed Army Hospital, and you would go through a program and get a two year nursing degree and a commission. But I didn't want to be a nurse. And I didn't want to be in the Army, and I didn't want to do anything my *father* did. (both laugh) I had to be my own—person. And, my mother really didn't say much, but um—at this time also in 1972, the age of consent for *women* was *twenty-one*. And my father said that he wouldn't sign for me. So, we had a little argument, and, I got mad and said, “Well, if you don't sign then I'll leave home and go to a state where the age of consent is 18.” And, my mother told me to leave the house, and she never did tell me what was said that night, but when I came home the papers were signed. (both chuckle) But uh—so I went to the Air Force.

Terry: Can you tell us a little bit about then—where did you go for basic training?

Thomas: All basic training is conducted at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio. There were five girls from Wisconsin that uh—left—on the 3rd of February to go down to um, San Antonio, and on the plane we met some other recruits from Indiana that were headin' down, but um—

Terry: Was there anybody else from Green Bay that was going?

Thomas: Uh, no. Actually the other girls, they were from the southern part of the state, you know, Madison, Milwaukee, outlying areas like that. But um—when I went through basic training, the women, they did not have to run the confidence course.

Terry: Now, what was that?

Thomas: The obstacle course. You know, the ropes and ladders and trees and mud and stuff like that. And the uh—we also did not have to qualify on the M16s or any other weaponry [sic]. Because, at this time women did not fulfill any kind of combat—you know, jobs. Or worked in such position like security police or something on that order. And we uh—while I was—when I joined the service I was, like all teenagers, kind of a hot head, and know-it-all and whatever. But the training instructors, they

uh—they were *good*. (Terry chuckles) You know, they—as basic training is, they break you down, as an individual, and they rebuild you as a *team*.

Terry: Now [were] most of the young women basically the same age or was there a range?

Thomas: We had a range. They were from like 18—I think the oldest in our group was about 30.

Terry: Oh, really.

Thomas: Mm hmm. And uh—because she was the oldest, the training instructor decided to make her uh—the dorm chief. (laughs) I guess she figured we'd listen to 'em.

Terry: So what was it like with all these young women that—probably the first time away from home, or—

Thomas: It was.

Terry: --you know, and uh—

Thomas: We had also—we had like five girls that came from Hawaii. They were uh, you know, Hawaiian, uh background. And, they probably had the roughest. Because they were the furthest away from home, their culture is, you know so family oriented and stuff. They—I would say that they had the roughest time in, you know, getting over homesickness, and stuff like that. And there were times that we all—went through—our bouts of homesickness and wondering—what in the devil are you doin' here? (Terry chuckles)

Terry: So, how was it basic training for ya? Did it end up being a tough—a fairly tough time, or were you able to adapt fairly quick to it?

Thomas: Um—they, they kept you busy. So you didn't really have a lot of time to, to think and to dwell on, you know, what your friends and families were doing back home and stuff like that. I think for the most part I adapted pretty well. My folks were—you know, they were, they were disciplinarians, and uh—you know if you acted up, you suffered the consequences, and uh—you know they—they made us go yes sir, no sir, stuff like that. I mean, you know—they put manners into our heads, and whatever, and uh—I think the hardest part was um—you know trying to get some of that individualism, um, taken away from you. And uh—you know once, once they started to rebuild you as a team. But it's like—the classes we had in basic training, you know—depending on the schedule for the day—you know we'd be up at 4:30, 5 o'clock in the morning,

they'd march us over to um, um, breakfast, and then we'd come back and clean our dorms, and make beds, and you know, happy things like that. And, then there would be um—oh—classes for like military etiquette. They would take us out to the parade grounds, and uh, teach us military drill. We even had classes on um—oh—cosmetic type things you know—how to wear makeup, how to comb your hair, personal hygiene, since not everybody, you know, would take a shower everyday or whatever. But you know, they did a lot of things. They, you know, taught us how to wear the military uniform correctly. Um—like I say, they just kept us goin' from day to day, and hour to hour, and uh, our days would usually—mm—probably to about six o'clock in the evening, and then after that, you know, we'd have to study—from our little book. You know, learn uh—you know, things like uh—oh—military history and stuff like that. And we probably went to bed about nine o'clock, or so. And then of course you had, uh, the charge quarters, or fire watch, whatever you want to call it you know—someone would have to be on watch—all night long.

Terry: Couple hours a shift or something?

Thomas: So you know, everybody had a chance to do a couple hours here and there. Mm hmm.

Terry: So after you got out of basic—now when you went into it did you—were you going in for a certain training thing or—

Thomas: Well, when I showed up at the recruiting station in Green Bay, I had it in my head that I was going to do things, and I uh—alphabetical order—start with the Air Force and then work through the other services if I decided I didn't like what the Air Force had to say. But I ended up taking the uh—the entrance exam. And a couple weeks later I had a phone call from the recruiting sergeant, and he said, “Well, you qualify to be an aircraft mechanic.” And it's like—“Say what?” (both laugh) And uh—of course once again at this time, women did not *do* things like, you know, aircraft maintenance or security police, um—they were basically relegated to office work, finance, the medical corps. I had wanted to be a medical lab technician. And uh—so I ended up going in under what they call the general heading. And, I was—I was lucky. I eventually did get the training that I wanted as a medical lab technician. And uh—it was fun!

Terry: So what was your first unit after you got out of [basic]?

Thomas: Well—what we did, is after you did your six weeks at Lackland, some people—they were Direct Duty Assignments. Or there were some that uh—most of us went on to uh—technical school. And I went to technical school at Sheppard Air Force Base up at Wichita Falls, Texas. In north Texas. And, all medical personnel had to go through—oh, a six-week

course, in um—basically being a combat medic. You know we learned uh, you know first aid—we took in um—oh, we learned how to carry litters, how to load ‘em onto vehicles, helicopters, all kinds of things. And also at that time you learned about the, the organization of the medical corps, which was at that time a little bit different from the line part of the Air Force. And, at the conclusion of our six weeks of training, we went out into the so-called wilds of north Texas for about two and a half days, and what we *did* was we set up a um—kind of like a forward area hospital. You know, something on the order of MASH type of thing. And you know, we, we lived in tents, and uh, all that kind of fun stuff. Ate the K-rations (laugh), and—I think some of them were a little older than most of *us*. But, at this time, we took and—they would give us different, uh, medical problems and we would have to, you know, come up with solutions. And we uh—at the time, the women’s utility uniform consisted of dark blue, cotton pants, that zipped up the side, and a light blue cotton shirt. And they weren’t really—that good for a situation where you’re out crawling around—

Terry: In the field.

Thomas: --in the field and stuff like that. So, we were given permission to talk to boyfriends, or male classmates, to see if we could borrow a pair of their green fatigues, or as they called ‘em, pickle suits. And I got a guy’s fatigues that—he was probably about six foot four, (laughs) and, did a *lot* of rolling. (both laugh) I think the waistband was up uh, under my chin. And um—it was a—it was really a fun two and a half days. I mean, we learned how to read maps, and use compasses, and you know, like say call in for uh—you know air transport, and stuff like that. We would carry uh—the litters over obstacles, you know like under barbed wire with the patient on it. Over, under, around, buildings—

Terry: So are most of the people in the class male? Because it sounds like they were—you were training for a combat situation.

Thomas: Well, you know—we did have uh—oh heck, there must have been maybe about twenty women that went on this two and a half day venture to north Texas. And even though we couldn’t be trained for *combat*, it was also—I don’t know if they were looking forward into the future, or if they were looking at the possibility of mass casualty situations, you know like a tornado, or, you know hurricane or something on that order where you could be called in to, you know to help back up folks. But when we got back from our two and a half days out in the wilds, then we broke up into our individual, specialized training. And for the medical laboratory, um, program, I spent an additional five months in uh—at Sheppard Air Force Base, and that was the book learning portion of the uh—

Terry: So can you just—

Thomas: --book training.

Terry: --basically describe a medical lab technician, what they do?

Thomas: Well, a medical lab technician—we do all kinds of things. We instruct patients on how to collect samples like, urine, stool, this type of thing. The lab tech—they're also called the vampire because we draw blood. We take it in the back, into the laboratory, and depending on what a physician may have ordered, it could go in to uh, hematology where you study like red cells—or red blood cells and white blood cells, this type of thing. Coagulation studies for clotting. The chemistry, where you look at things like sugar, electrolytes, liver enzymes and such. Serology could include testing for like mono, pregnancy, um—oh what do you call it—sexually transmitted diseases. I mean, it just goes on and on. And then we also would do—microbiology, where cultures would be collected from throats, or wounds, from the samples that we had patients collect from like stools or urines. And we would put 'em onto media to look at um—you know to see if there's some kind of a bacterial infection, that's causing the person's illness or discomfort. We also did parasitology, where we um—we would look at a person's stool sample after we processed it and such, and we would look for parasites. Some technicians, if they were at a larger facility, would do mycology where you're working with fungal materials. Like TB and such.

Terry: So basically you're being trained to work in a—like a hospital type situation.

Thomas: I'd be working—

Terry: Or a lab?

Thomas: --primarily in a hospital. But then again too, I've worked in a—a two doctor clinic. So I mean, I've done everything from the smallest to the largest.

Terry: After you got done with your training, where were you—what was one of your first assignments then?

Thomas: Well, actually, my career field, as a medical laboratory technician, is *unique*, in the fact that um—our training comes in two phases. You do the technical school at Sheppard, and then from there you go to a Phase *Two*. And usually that's conducted at a large hospital, in the Air Force, and that would be an additional nine months of training. And that would be where you get all of your on-the-job training type of thing, plus we also attended

classes and uh, and such. And from Sheppard, I went to Keesler Air Force Base, Medical Center, in Biloxi, Mississippi. And, also, at the time that I went in the service, the medical lab field was one of the very *few* that you got *college* credits, for your *training*. At the time we finished our fifteen months of training, we had accumulated thirty-six credits, through the Community College of the Air Force. Which was relatively new. And um, we could take those thirty-six uh, hours, and we could take and transfer ‘em to Midwestern University out of Wichita Falls, and we could apply that towards getting a uh, a Bachelors in Medical Technology. *If* you so desired.

And um, so, I went to Keesler. And like I say, I was there for nine months. And uh—oh we had uh—patients, you know uh—we had Vietnamese, uh patients. They were uh, pilot students. And that was kind of my first introduction with a language barrier, because I didn’t know French, and I didn’t know Vietnamese. And when you’re trying to give instructions to someone that there’s no interpreter or translator, it gets to be kind of interesting, ‘cause like this one day I had to give instructions to this young man for getting a stool sample. And I’m trying to use every word and gesture that I can, and finally it seems like he’s got the idea. And he goes into the bathroom, and a little while later he puts the container on the turnstile, it’s a pass window. And I’m on the other side, so, it looks like, well, it *feels* like there’s something in there. And I opened it, and what it was was his boxers. And I says, “Someone else has gotta work for this guy, (Terry laughs) ‘cause I just don’t know what to *do* anymore.” And then, also as a—the junior student in microbiology, we um—the junior student would have to collect the samples, for guys that were coming in for possible um—what do you call it—gonorrhea cultures.

And, while I was at Keesler, I made a lot of firsts. I was the first female Phase Two student. And—they didn’t know what to do with me. They didn’t know if I should live with the students, you know, that were there for uh, you know Morse code and stuff like that, or if I should live with the Permanent Party people. And it took me a couple of days to figure out where I was gonna live. And then, um—the other thing is, is, at this time, there were two separate squadrons for women. You had your female, or your Women in the Air Force, WAF, squadron. And that was for your living, and physical conditioning uh, needs. And then you had your male squadron, which was where you *worked*. And sometimes the two of them would fight over ya. Because, you know, they’d want you for this detail or that detail, or whatever. So—but I was also the first, women, student, for the Phase Two program with the laboratory. Well anyhow, this uh, instructor told me I had to collect the uh, urethral swab from this, this young man. And I don’t who got redder, him or me. (both chuckle) But um, thank God I didn’t *have* to collect it. (both chuckle) But uh—also during that time I was at Keesler, we also drew blood as part of the Armed

Services Whole Blood Program. And that blood was uh, collected, processed, and sent to the troops in Vietnam.

Terry: Can we just talk a little bit about Vietnam? 'Cause the Vietnam War was still going on pretty good. And um—can you tell us how did the Air Force sent the peop—the women—were there any women there that were sent overseas, or—that you know of—or how that worked?

Thomas: To the best of my knowledge, the only women that I knew, personally that went to Vietnam, were nurses. And, like I say, I had tried to volunteer, to go to Vietnam, but um—it was rejected. And like I say, the main thing is, is the mentality of the 1970's and such, was such that women did not serve in a combat situation. And as far as the *nurses* went, they were kind of put into a different category, as far as they were *needed* for the *well-being* of the troops. And they were normally at a base. They were not out in the jungles or anything like that. They were, so called relatively safe. And I did have one friend—I know she wasn't—well she wasn't actually in Vietnam. She was stationed in Thailand. And she was a cryptographer.

Terry: And what would that be?

Thomas: They were the one—the cryptographers—they're the people that, you know, intercept messages and decode 'em, type of thing. But I—as far as enlisted Air Force women, I really didn't know of any. And I don't think I've ever met any.

Terry: So um, getting back to your regular tour of duty then. You originally signed up for four years? Is that what the tour was at the time?

Thomas: Yes. Mm hmm.

Terry: And uh, how long—now you're into it about two years?

Thomas: Uh—almost. There was one thing—when I was in—when I was at Keesler—was uh, when they brought home some of the POWs. And what they did to the POWs from Vietnam, was they took one floor of a wing, of the hospital, and that wing was—it was—tight security. Only certain people could get in. And uh—it was almost like the prisoners were being put into the second prison. But you know, these people, they'd been gone for many years. They needed to be debriefed. God only knew what their physical shape was, and what kind of diseases they may have contracted, and whatever. So, even though it seemed like a second prison, it was a dual thing. But one day I was working in the drawing room, and a female full-bird Colonel walks in with a full-bird male patient. And, I looked at his request slips and I saw that he had a lot of blood work to be done. And some of it had, required fasting. And I explained this to both of the

Colonels. And the male Colonel said that he would, he would like me to draw as much of the blood as I could right then, and he'd come back tomorrow for the drawing. And I says, "Ok. You know, it's your call, sir, and I'll do what you want." Come to find out, the individual whose blood I drew, was a Colonel Bud Day. Who was one of the big prisoners, and he eventually became a General. But um, he got tired of being locked away in this ward, even though they had beer machines, and soda machines, and anything they wanted to eat. But he wanted to get out and see some people. And so I—I had the privilege of drawing his blood. While he was—after he'd been a repatriated POW.

- Terry: That had to be a pretty good experience for a young lady, because, you know these guys were all coming back and had spent—some of them had probably spent five years in prisons—and that had to be quite an experience for you to witness this.
- Thomas: It, it was. I mean, everybody was kind of getting—you know, the medical staff—they were gettin' kind of excited because they thought they were going to see all kinds of, you know, exotic diseases and stuff like that, and—in some ways I guess the medical staff was let down a little bit. You know, these guys weren't, uh, you know, infested with all kinds of parasites and whatever, but, you know, their physical and mental conditions were, you know, they needed some work, but, it was a—it was an honor to work with these folks.
- Terry: So what made you—when your first tour of duty was coming to an end—what made you think about re-enlisting?
- Thomas: Well, um, my first Permanent Party, I was stationed at Wilford Hall Medical Center at Lackland Air Force Base in Texas, and—that's my phone (buzzing in background)—I was trained—or I was working in the blood bank. And my primary job was to um—oh what do you call it—train student—lab students—and also lab *officers*. Because the lab officers, they would um—you know, they'd have their Bachelors and Masters and such in Chemistry or something on that order, but they didn't know anything about the *laboratory*. So we would have to put the officers through a year program to teach them—not necessarily how to run the equipment or collect blood or whatever—but they had to be familiar with what the troops did so that they could manage 'em and this type of thing. And my next assignment I went to Incirlik Air Base, in Adana, Turkey. And I'd only been in country for about a—a week—when the Greeks and the Turks started fighting over Cyprus. And Incirlik is a common defense installation, which meant we had the US Air Force, the Turkish Air Force, and Turkish Army all on the same base. And we got to see the Turkish jets come in, you know, shot up, and they'd patch em up, refuel--

[End of Tape One Side A]

- Terry: Tape One Side B. Interview with Deborah Thomas who served with the US Air Force, and she's speaking about when she was in Turkey and the war broke out between Turkey and uh—
- Thomas: Greece. Over Cyprus.
- Terry: And she was over in country at that time.
- Thomas: But um—we could travel freely, but we could not, say, take our cameras off base. You know, it was just, you know, the Turks were very sensitive about security and such. But after hostilities ended in um—between Greece and Turkey, or at least the fighting part, I mean they still—I guess the country's still divided to this day—but um, we were allowed to take our cameras and go—travel. And some friends and I decided we were gonna jump on a Turkish bus and go to Mersin. We wanted to go out for seafood. And I'd been in country for over a month and I hadn't seen anything of Turkey yet. Well, on the way back—you know, they told us we could—we could take pictures but we couldn't take pictures of the troops. Well we get to Mersin, which is a seaport on the Mediterranean. We're taking pictures of ships in the bay, gun emplacements on the beaches, and—we're taking pictures of everything we shouldn't be. (Terry laughs) Well we get back on the bus, and we're headin' back to Adana, and the uh—we decided we're gonna get off in Tarsus, supposedly the birthplace of St. Paul. My friends and I, we're all history buffs. And we were looking to find the so-called site. And we'd—one of the guys had stopped to take a picture of a uh—a bath house—Turkish bathhouse. And a Turkish National policeman with an Uzi—machine gun—came over, tapped him on the shoulder and, he asked us to follow him. And—yeah, sure. We're not going to fight with an Uzi. (Terry laughs) Well they took us to the local jail. They didn't put us in jail. But uh—we, we had so many people come and look at our papers. We had our passports. We had a little blue book, in Turkish and English, who explained who we were and what we were—NATO troops—and where we were stationed. We had our Turkish driver's license. We showed 'em our military ID cards. Our stateside licenses. We even showed 'em pictures of our families. And we realized, some of the TNP, or Turkish National Police, didn't know how to read. Because our papers were upside *down*. (Terry laughs) But they—the policemen were really nice to us, they went out and got us lunch, and they got us something to drink, and—they finally let us go, after everybody in town I guess looked at us. And uh—we were leaving and we ran into a Catholic priest. An American. So he took us to the site of St. Paul, and all it is is an old well that's painted bright, bright blue. And, all we wanted to do was get back on the bus then, and uh—the next day we signed up for Turkish classes. (Terry chuckles) But—the

thing is, what made me stay, to do a second tour, is—I *liked* the opportunity to travel. I *liked* the job that I was doing. I mean, as a buck Sergeant, an Air Force E4, I had um, job responsibilities that I may not see in the civilian world for another ten years or such. I mean I was the Assistant NCOIC [Non-Commissioned Officer In Charge] of the laboratory. You know, I just—I liked that level of responsibility. And, I met some wonderful people. And, I don't know, I guess I didn't want to leave 'em.

Terry: Now, at that point that you were re-upping, were you thinking of a career in the military?

Thomas: At that time, no. I—then again, too, you know I was thinking, well how do you separate from the service when you're half a world away? And, so I figured, well, what's another four, you know. While I was in Turkey I was taking classes through the University of Maryland. And I figured, well, I'll get some more college under my belt. And, then when I get out, after another four years—I can uh, you know, I'll have some, some good experience behind me and uh, I can move on. And—when I came back to the States I ended up at Luke Air Force Base in Arizona, and I was only there for, oh—maybe fifteen months. And from there, I ended up going to the Philippines. And uh, I'd only been in country for about a week and I ended up being a bailiff at a court-martial for one of the fellows in the hospital. He decided to leave in the middle of a shift and not come back for a week. But uh, they wanted somebody that didn't know any of the parties involved, and so it was my first experience with military justice. And also while I was in the Philippines, we would go on what we called MEDCAP programs. [Medical Civic Action Program] And what it was, is, we would get a team of doctors, dentists, nurses, corpsmen—for many of the medical career fields—and we would go out into the—the backcountry of the Philippines. And sometimes these medical teams were the only experience that the natives had with uh, medicine in any size, shape or form, other than, you know, a witch doctor or something on that order. And it was quite an experience—to go into the backcountry. But while I was in Turkey—

Terry: When you went into these backcountries, did they provide you with some sort of escort?

Thomas: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

Terry: Ok.

Thomas: I mean, most of the Filipinos, they, they know English. You know, but those are primarily the folks that, that live in the cities. The folks that live out in the, in the backcountry, like the Negritos and stuff like that, they

would have to send interpreters with us, because—most of the Americans, we would learn Pampanga, which is the district's dialect of the Filipino language. And of course we never really got that proficient, because you know, hanging around a military base all the Filipinos knew English. So we didn't really get much of a chance to—hone our skills. But uh, they would—they would provide us with translators. And they'd also provide us with people to help carry some of the packs that we had.

Terry: So you were doing a lot of humanitarian aid.

Thomas: Well—

Terry: In a sense.

Thomas: Yeah. But uh, you know it was an education for us too. I mean, we got a chance to see, you know, how other people lived. And, um, you know it uh—I guess there was a little bit of humanitarian, but there was a lot of—interest. You know from a cultural—

Terry: Did you—were you able to pick the Philippines for a tour of duty? Or how did you--

Thomas: Well--

Terry: --happen to get over there?

Thomas: I kept volunteering to go to Alaska and they kept sending me every place *but*. (Terry laughs) You fill out a form—they called it the Dream Sheet. (chuckles) And you might have seven choices of where you want to go. And, I'd always have Alaska as my number one choice. And—by the time I got to the seventh choice I'd say, "Fine. Just send me wherever." And, I'd put worldwide. Well, that's how I got *Turkey*. (Terry chuckles) And there was a rumor that the U.S. government would pay the Turkish government, say, ten thousand dollars for each U.S. troop that was in country. Well supposedly, that ten thousand dollars could be used for that one person *innumerable* times. I ended up doin' two *tours* in Turkey. (chuckles) So, I don't know if that was true or not. But while I was in Turkey, we did not have any military individuals in the local prison. But we did have some European individuals that had had brushes with the law. We had, like for instance, two young ladies that were smuggling hash in from Syria. And the Turks caught 'em. And they were initially [sentenced] to the death sentence. It got commuted to life, and at the time I left, in fifteen months, it was commuted to twenty-five years. But what we would do, is once a month we would take a doctor, a dentist, a corpsman, and if we had a high-risk individual, someone that was—had the potential to get into some serious trouble—it was our version of Scared

Straight. And—you don't want to go to a Turkish prison. I mean, the movie *Midnight Express* is no exaggeration. To this day that movie is still banned in Turkey. And um—but we would go up there and provide medical support for anybody, and we also would take someone from the Chaplain's Office. So you know, we kinda kept an eye on any of the Europeans that were in the area. But um—from the Philippines, I went to—I went back to the States to New Mexico, Kirtland Air Force Base. And I was there for—about three years, I believe. Something like that. and uh—it was—it was an exciting experience. I mean—

Terry: Now, were you able to go up—you were E4 at the end of your first tour? Were you able to gain any more in ranking?

Thomas: Um—

Terry: 'Cause sometimes they said the Air Force was really—slow.

Thomas: Well, usually—the rank through E4 was pretty automatic.

Terry: Ok.

Thomas: Then what happens, is when you start going for E5 and above, that's when it gets real competitive because—you take a test on your military knowledge. You take another test on your job knowledge. And they have what they call a weighted factor. They take and look at things like your annual appraisals over like a ten-year period. And they give a weighted value towards that. And then they give you some points for Time-in-Service, Time-in-Grade. If you had any awards and decorations that didn't show you were *there*. You know, like national defense or something like that. But if you had gotten like a Commendation Medal or something like that, that would be a point or so. And then they would take all this stuff together. And they would—you'd come up with a total score. And from there, they would say, "Ok, for E5s. We only have ten thousand spots for this year." Well, they would start ranking people by your Air Force Specialty Code—or like the Army calls an MOS [Military Occupation Specialty] or whatever. They would break it out into different AFSCs. And it took me—oh, I think I was in for about a total of seven years before I made E5.

And—when I left New Mexico—in I think it was '82—I finally got my assignment to Alaska. It took me awhile. (both chuckle) And I was originally supposed to have been stationed at Elmendorf Air Force Base, which is in Anchorage, but—a couple of months before I left they diverted me to Eielson, which is at Fairbanks in the interior. And actually, I think I got the better deal. But um—what nobody told me is when, on my way up to Alaska, was that—they had an individual that was not qualified for the

job. He was what we called a cross-trainee. He had used to be a B-52 mechanic. And, people sometimes cross-train, because, you know, they don't have a desire—they never wanted to be something—or maybe um—medical reasons they had to get off of the flight line or whatever. Well this individual apparently wasn't wearing his harness, and walking the wing of a B-52, and they say he fell on his back—I say he fell on his *head*. But what happened is, he was kind of one of these people that kept falling between the cracks. He should have never have been in the medical field. He just didn't have the—the interest, he didn't have the desire, the intelligence, whatever. And they just kept passin' him. Well, he did his training in Sheppard like everybody else. And—he should've washed out because his scores were not high. But, because he was a non-commissioned officer, they just kind of said, "Well, he'll get better." Well then he went to the Air Force Academy for his Phase Two training. And—weell, they kind of passed the buck on him too, because, he couldn't do the work.

Terry: And nobody wanted to let him go?

Thomas: Well, you know. He had the grounds for Medical Review Board. And the Medical Review Board said that he didn't need to be in that field. Well, I don't know how he got the Review Board to retract its findings and whatever, but he talked the Laboratory Officer into letting him finish the program so he had something to fall back on when he got out. 'Cause they were gonna medically retire him. Well, in the meantime, he got the Medical Review Board results—rescinded. And all of a sudden—here they got this guy; they don't know what to do with him. So they send him to Dyess Air Force Base in Texas. Well, it's like—"Well there's a Master Sergeant down there. They'll take care of him. They'll wash him out." Well, the man down there had a heart attack. In the meantime this guy makes Tech Sergeant—Technical Sergeant—E6. And he becomes the man in charge, of the lab. (Terry chuckles) Well they had documentation to do something with this guy, but the administration *passed* the *buck*. Well they sent him to Alaska. "Well there's a Master Sergeant up there. *They'll* take care of him." Well this guy is getting ready to retire, so he doesn't care about *anything*. So this—this Technical Sergeant is in charge of five young kids. E4s, E3s. And, they eventually all ended up seeing the social worker because they were extreme cases of burnout and whatever. So it was my job, unbeknownst to me at the time, to go up there, and kind of be a gunslinger and clean up the mess. Well—I was told I was going to have five techs up there—five technicians. Well I get up there—I have this Tech Sergeant, and I have a Staff Sergeant. Well the Staff Sergeant's only going to be with me for thirty days and he's on *his* way to *his* new assignment. Everybody else had gotten out.

Terry: Oh, really.

Thomas: And, so what happened is, I had to learn my new job, put this guy through a managerial training program—and he'd already gone through one at Elmendorf and one at Travis Air Force Base in California, and he said, "Well they didn't teach me anything." Well they were gonna give one more chance. And it was my job to do something with this character—and I'm only an E5 Staff Sergeant.

Terry: You're less than *he* is.

Thomas: But, I had, you know, upwards of twelve years—ten years—in the medical field. And he only had, you know, three or four. Well, as I found out that not only could he not, you know, manage the laboratory like doing reports and whatever, you know, make out requests for supplies and equipment and whatever—I also found out he couldn't draw blood. If his signature showed up on a lab report, the doctors would send the patient back in hopes that someone else would get the patient. And it got to the point where I had the guy so decertified and everything all he could do was say "Hi" at the front door. And I was the only technician. Well, I eventually got some help, but to make E6—they had a program they called STEP promotion—Stripes for Exceptional Performers. And what it was, is if you had an individual that was a star performer or whatever, you would put together a package, with all the documentation to support and then it would go before a board and whatever. Well one day I was—I was working in the lab, and I was doin' some training with a new person, and I hear the clinic commander and he's out in the hallway with some other people, talking. It's like, ok, it's just another tour going through. And I walked out and here's General Lynwood Clark, a four-star—he was the Alaskan Air Command commander. And he starts asking me questions about my laboratories. What the *heck*. And all of a sudden he takes and he slaps me on the *arm*. And, you know—I was like, why would he slap me on the arm? (Terry chuckles) And I looked up my sleeve, and what he had done is he had put on a new stripe for me. So I made um—Technical Sergeant under this STEP promotion. And it's the only time I ever got a four-star endorsement on the annual appraisal. (both laugh)

Terry: Good for you.

Thomas: And we had a—at Eielson—the laboratory—like say we had five people. It was a clinic, and we had—oh, maybe seven or eight doctors. But uh, the size of our laboratory, we were what they call a Class D, which is probably about as low as you can go. And we had to go through inspections and such, you know like the hospital service inspection, but we went one step further. We went for the College of American Pathologists accreditation also. And we were one of the few, uh, small laboratories that had maintained and gotten the College of American

Pathologists accreditation. Which made us rather unique ____ (??).
(unintelligible-both talking at once) My guys and I, we were very proud
of our accomplishment.

Terry: Sure. So what was it like serving in Alaska?

Thomas: It was—it was fun. I mean, you dressed for the weather. And uh—it was
too cold to drive a government vehicle. It was too cold drive yours. (both
laugh) You know, 24-hour sun in the summer. Sometimes you'd forget to
go to bed—(chuckles)—and you'd have to go to work in the morning. But
um—I had a friend that was—he was one of the Arctic Survival
instructors for the aircrews. And sometimes if there was an available spot,
he would—let some of the folks on base, you know, sit in on the classes. I
mean, why run a class half full when you can run a full class? And so I
got the opportunity to go through the Arctic Survival. And that—*that* was
interesting. That was *fun*. Building snow caves and (chuckles) living on
whatever you could find out on the tundra, if you could find anything.
(laughs). But, you know, he taught us where to look.

Terry: So where else in the world were you able to—it sounded like you got to
have a pretty wide, uh—all over the world.

Thomas: I was lucky. I mean—I did two tours in Turkey. The other time I went to
Turkey, I went to Izmir, which is on the Aegean seacoast. And uh, Izmir
used to be known as Smyrna, by the Greeks. And, you know—that's one
of the reasons the Greeks and Turks don't like each other is because they
kept invading each other back and forth and stuff like that, and after World
War I, the Turks burnt down el Smyrna, and rebuilt it as Izmir. But—in
Izmir it was a unique thing. We did not have a base per se. It was a
collection of rented buildings, throughout the city. Now, the primary
mission was a NATO base. And the troops were divided into the
Nationals and the NATO. And I fell under the Nationals, because I was
support. And we had a clinic. And we only had two doctors. Three, if
you counted the clinic commander, but he didn't have clinic every day.
And then we, you know, we had some dentists, uh, that were in another
building, and we'd have, oh, different specialties that'd come in and visit
us periodically, you know, for like GYN [gynecology], oh—different
people. But, we were just a collection of buildings. And, we were the
Nationals because we were support—we were the, you know, the
personnel office, finance, the medics, civil engineers. And then the
National—or the NATO rather—they were the ones that actually worked
with the foreign troops. We had Germans, Italians, Canadians—um,
mm—we'd have some Spaniards come through periodically. And um—
they were the ones that were basically—doing other things. They never
really told us and we really didn't want to know. (laughs)

But um—so anyhow, since we didn't have a base per se, everybody had to live, in an apartment. So as a single person, you know, I got to take over my household goods with me instead of, you know, using military—furniture. But um, I had a—penthouse apartment. It overlooked the Bay of Izmir. I was the only American in an apartment of sixteen people. (laughs) and—it was, it was fun. I mean—the Turkish people are wonderful. They'll give you the shirt off their back if they think you need it more than they do. And I—Izmir is a city of about two million. I could walk those streets at three o'clock in the morning, and no one would bother me. Well the building next door to me, housed the governor of Izmir. And he had all these Turkish National Police, outside guarding and whatever, and—I guess I made 'em nervous. (both chuckle) And I didn't know it, but uh, I was the only American in the neighborhood, and I was living next door, and I had all these strange hours because I'd be on call. And when they call me, it's like, well I had to go in. Well, before I got my car, I would have to go and catch a cab. So I'd walk out of my building, you know, three o'clock in the morning, and all of a sudden these guys would, you know, turn their machine guns on. Then they finally got a hold of my landlord, who explained who I was, what I was, and whatever. And so after that, when I would come out of the building, if I didn't have my car, whoever in charge of the guard detail, he would motion for me to wait. He would go inside make a phone call. There'd be a cab.

Terry: There'd be a car for ya. (laughs)

Thomas: But I mean—you could walk the streets, at all hours of the night, and nobody would bother you. And, um—and like I say, we were on the coast, um, we're on a—it was—well it was close to the Aegean Sea but we were in a bay area. And we also had an American Consulate that was on the bay side. And it was kind of funny. The Russians would—the Russian Navy would pull into port. And they would park right in front of the American Consulate. And you *knew* that it was a spy ship, because you see all the *antennas*, and—oh, it was just *funny*. I mean, there was no pretense. And, um—and then one time Prince Charles came to visit. So we had to make sure we had enough blood on hand in case something happened to him, you know, just like if the President was traveling, you—he always carries his own blood with him. But um—it was—and we got to travel all over the country and—like I say, my friends and I, we all were history buffs, and—we just—we had fun.

Terry: So how many years total did you end up serving in the Air Force?

Thomas: Twenty-four.

Terry: Twenty-four. And what was your rank when you uh, retired?

Thomas: I made—E7, Master Sergeant. One of the things they did, um—they developed somethin' they called TOPCAP [Total Objective Plan Career Airmen Personnel]. And what it was was, some people would stay on forever and a year, and they just couldn't get promoted, for one reason or another. And, to say(??) they have a Staff Sergeant E5 stick around for thirty years, it's kind of silly. So they started saying, ok, if you, if you can't get past Staff Sergeant, by twenty years, you're gonna retire. Technical Sergeant you had to twenty-two. And Master Sergeant you had to twenty-four. Well, I—I just—I guess sometimes I forgot to play the game of politics, and I just didn't get the endorsements on my annual appraisals that I needed to be a serious contender, but uh—you know, I was having fun doing what I wanted.

Terry: So overall what did you think of your military career?

Thomas: I'd do it again tomorrow. If they'd let me. I mean, like I say, I worked with some of the greatest people. Uh, the *job* I loved. And—well, when I—my last base was Peterson Air Force Base, Colorado Springs, Colorado. And—it was a time of great change in the Air Force. They were going from—what the original structure they had your line units, that would include personnel, flight maintenance, you know, the pilots and everybody. And then you had the medical people. And what they finally got around to doing is to aligning the medical corps like they did it with the line units. And we became—instead of the 21st Medical Clinic, we became the 21st Medical Group, I think it was. So we'd have like a Group commander. And then from there we, we broke out the different parts of the medical corps into like um, oh, different divisions. Like we would have um, nursing support. There would be administrative support. And I came under what they called ancillary support. And what that meant—or ancillary services, rather. Under ancillary services we had the medical laboratory, radiology services, and uh, pharmaceuticals. And I became the superintendent of ancillary services. Which meant that uh, I had the lab, x-ray and pharmacy, and on the day-to-day operations I didn't do anything. You know, that was, that was left to the experts in their particular career fields. I was just the overall manager. I made sure that they got reports in on time, they developed their budgets. I became involved if they were having problems with disciplinary problems. I made sure that people that were worthy of promotion or awards and decorations got what they needed. And you know—I was just kind of the overseer. But—we were the smallest group of people between the three departments. If we had thirty people we had a lot. But we had the biggest budget. We probably, between the three departments, we probably had about fifty million dollars, that we were responsible for on an annual basis. But uh, you know, we also saw the Air Force go to uh—they called it Total Quality Management. During the time I was in the service we saw all kinds of different management styles and such.

Terry: Right. Yeah.

Thomas: And this one—at first it was met like with everything else. Some resistance, but uh, eventually people got the idea. Because you'd spend a lot of time—

[End of Tape One Side B]

Terry: This is Tape Two Side A, Deborah L. Thomas, and we're talking about her Air Force career. And she was talking about the Total Quality Management program that the Air Force was putting together in the early '90's.

Thomas: Yeah, it um—they were trying to streamline the meetings, so that you weren't spending all day in meetings that weren't accomplishing anything. They had us flow chart the processes that we did our work in, like from the time you would say collect the, a sample from a patient till the time it got back into the laboratory for analysis. We had flip charts all over the place on processes that we were flowcharting. That's when it got kind of irritating because you want your place looking professional and you've got all these pieces of paper hung up and, whatever. But in the long run, I do believe that the Total Quality Management *concept* was a good one, and uh, it just—it seemed to make things go better, and faster in the um, the execution of your duties and responsibilities.

But I was just thinking um—when I first came in service, women could be married, and that was fine. If you got *pregnant*, you had no choice. You were um—you were asked to leave the military. And there was no—you could not file a grievance or anything like that, you had no choice in the matter.

Terry: Even if you were [married]?

Thomas: If you were married, they did not want um, married individuals. Especially with kids. Because you had the problem what happens if somebody—you know, this was in 1972 you gotta remember. We had a different idea of what was goin' on. During the '80's, after they went to the all-volunteer air—military—they started—the recruiter started actively recruiting single parents. And it wasn't until they were—(comment to another person)—until you got a little further into, you know, after they've been in the service about a year or so, after they've finished all their training and whatever, that problems started occurring. Because, if you had to deploy on a moments notice, what do you do with your child? So, they started saying ok, now you've gotta take and have somebody who's going to be legally responsible for your child or children until either they

can be sent to a grandparent or whomever, or someone can come and pick 'em up. But they did not want another military *person* to be responsible. And so what was happening is, some of these single parents were having problems finding somebody that they could trust, to take care of their children until such a time that they could be sent to, to whomever. And so, like I say, in the '80s there were a lot of men and women that, they either found someone to take care of their kids or they were separated. I mean, it may sound a little cruel, but uh, it was just one of those things. And, you know the thing is is, also um, when I first went in service, the marriage between two active duty members wasn't—wasn't that common so it wasn't real hard to get 'em to be stationed at the same place. But as more and more women came into the military, and there were more and more marriages between military members, it became harder and harder to get husband and wives at the same base. And sometimes there would be separations of up to two years, before they could get the two parties—in the same *state*, let alone the same *base*. So I mean, there were some uh—you know there were some difficulties that, you know, came from increasing the number of women into the military.

And uh, you know—when I was stationed at Lackland Air Force Base, in like '73, '74 time frame is about the time they started letting *women* into the security police, uh, career field. Now they could only basically be at the gates. In the law enforcement they would have it broke up into security, and then they would have uh, like ground area defense. Well the ground area defense people are those that um, you know, they guard the airplanes and stuff like that, so the women were excluded from that for a long period of time.

And—I forget when it was that they—I guess it was in the late '70s or early '80s that they started letting women, you know, into the military academies. 'Cause I know that when I was uh—when I was a student at Sheppard Air Force Base, what they did was, towards the last couple weeks before graduation, a list would come out with the hospitals that would be up for assignment, for us to choose from. And we would choose according to our class rank. And, in the '72, when I was getting ready to graduate from Sheppard, one of the places that I could choose for my second phase of training was the Air Force Academy in Colorado. But, I was told I could not apply there because I was a female. And in 1972 they did not have the living facilities for females at the Air Force Academy. So I couldn't go to Colorado and I ended up goin' to Mississippi. (both chuckle)

Terry: It sounds like you really—over the twenty-four years you were in the service, there was a lot of major changes that took place.

Thomas: There was. I mean, we had the first female general, shortly after I joined in '72. There were definitely uniform changes, I mean uh—those that were more serviceable. When I first went in, after I did my training and even while I was doing my training, we have to wear hospital *dresses*. That meant uh, you know wearing dresses and nylons, and uh, *nurses'* shoes. And—wearing a dress was not always the most logical thing, especially if you're having to climb up on things to get at supplies, or if you're down on your knees drawing blood from a person on a Stryker bed and he's upside down, and uh—dresses were not the most conducive thing. And pantsuits probably came out in about '73 for hospital individuals. And, oh it must have been—oh, about '76 or so, '77, when they finally authorized a pantsuit for the women that uh—you know for your Service Dress Uniform. And, oh—it took 'em a long time to figure out that the women's fatigues just were not conducive to some of the jobs they were havin' women do, eventually, in the late '70s. And so they finally said, well, you can wear the green fatigues, or the pickle suit, that everybody associates with like, Vietnam. And for awhile there, the Battle Dress Uniform, or the BDU, *that* could only be worn by like the security police forces and uh, certain elite groups. And um—then, oh I guess it was, probably in the late '80s, something in that area, they started letting everybody wear the BDUs.

And—you know, seems like whenever a new chief of staff comes in they change the style of the uniform, and uh—or the design of a stripe. When I went in, E1 through E4, or actually E2-3-4, in the Air Force, you have your—we called them mosquito wings—(chuckles)—and then there was a blue field and there would be a silver star. Well, when you got to E4—when I first went in there was no break in the E4 rank. And what they did, you would go from Airman First Class to Sergeant, and that was an E4 with three stripes. Well somewhere along the line they decided that uh, they would break the E4 rank in half. And you would have the three stripes without the star. You'd be a Senior Airman. And you would have to serve a one-year's apprenticeship—this is Senior Airman—before you got your *star*. And *then* you could be a non-com. And—everyone thought that was the stupidest thing in the world, but, you know what are you going to do? Well from what I understand—I haven't noticed lately, but I still don't think they have the silver stars in the center of their stripes until they *make* E5.

Terry: Now, when you got out then, did you come back to Green Bay at that time?

Thomas: Yup. My family's from Green Bay. And my mother was still alive at that time. And my sisters had been takin' care of her, and—I had never had given up my Wisconsin state residency. And—I didn't know what I wanted to do. All I knew I wanted to do was go to school when I—when I

retired. And I figured I may as well come back to Wisconsin because, otherwise I'd have to pay out-of-state tuition. (chuckles) And I really didn't know where I wanted to go except for here.

Terry: And, you were taking all these college credits—

Thomas: Mm hmm.

Terry: Did you have a degree when you got out?

Thomas: Well—

Terry: Or close to it?

Thomas: I had picked up a um—Applied Science degree from the Community College of the Air Force, in Medical Technology. And then, when I *retired*, I looked at a bunch of the different schools in the area and whatever, and didn't really find anything that—really interested me. So I ended up going out to Northeast Wisconsin Technical College, and um—I enrolled in their Food Environmental Laboratory program. And I got an Associates from them, and I also got an Associates from NWTC for Supervisory Management. I was doing a double major so I could collect the full-time benefits. (laughs)

Terry: Sure. Absolutely.

Thomas: But, while I was out there I also tutored um, people in like different Chemistry disciplines, and Microbiology, I was helpin' out their lab students out there, and—it kept me in gas money, and soda money.

Terry: So, did you join any veterans' organizations when you got out then?

Thomas: When—when I took—and retired—one of the things they told us at a transition briefing, before we separated, was we were supposed to take our DD4 and 214, and go to our local VA, and check in with those folks, and get it registered with um, the City Register, or County Register of Deeds, whatever. And um—so I went to the Brown County VA, and I met one of our members, who was a county case officer, and she was settin' me up for, you know, a case file and whatever, and she asked if I'd joined anything, and I says, “No.” She says, “Well, you should have an advocate for your pension and disability, physical and such, in case somethin' happens.” And that's how I got involved with American Legion Post 539. And while I was going to NWTC, I had to um, oh—I had to do a community service project for a class, Sociology. And I ended up being put in touch with the Disabled American Vets here in town—Post—or Unit 3—and so I became a member of that organization. And while I was

in service I had joined like the Air Force Sergeants Association, Non-Commissioned Officers Association, but um—the only thing I’m really, real active in is uh, the American Legion and, uh, I’ve been the Adjutant for about a year. And then I also, um—been the Disbursing Director for an honor society of the American Legion, the Twenty and Four, which is the women’s equivalent of the Forty and Eight.

Terry: Mm hmm. Did you keep in touch with any people you served with?

Thomas: *Oh, yeah.*

Terry: You did.

Thomas: *Oh, yeah.*

Terry: Do you ever have anything like reunions or anything that you meet with?

Thomas: Not officially. But um—I get together with friends you know, as we’re traveling around and such. In fact, this summer, I’ll be goin’ up to—(coughs)—excuse me—Cheyenne to visit my brother, and along the way and in the area I’ll go and visit some friends and such. And um—oh, I keep in touch with some folks I was stationed with in Alaska—in fact they’re still up there. And uh, oh I keep in touch with some—an old boss of mine and his wife down in Arizona, so. You know, we keep in contact, mostly by email or phone.

Terry: Good. Um, looking back you know, as you milit—would you, you know recommend it to a young person comin’ out of high school today? What was your thoughts on that, being that it’s a little different now, but—would you recommend a career in the military?

Thomas: Obviously, the military’s not for everybody.

Terry: Right. Absolutely.

Thomas: Um, I know that, when they did away with the draft, I thought it was kind of a stupid idea to a certain degree. In the fact that, a lot of kids don’t know what they want. And I’m not sayin’ I’m an advocate of re-instating the draft, but maybe some kind of compulsory service, you know whether it’s like the Job Corps, or the Peace Corps, or something like that, to give folks a chance to figure out. But—for the right person I think the military *is* a good career move. I mean—like I say it’s just not for everybody.

Terry: But it was really a positive experience for you.

Thomas: It was. I mean—it uh—it made me grow up. (both laugh) And it gave me direction. And, like I say, I—I've got a—you know—memories galore. The good and the bad. But um—yeah, it's something that, like I say, I'd do again, if they'd let me. (chuckles)

Terry: Mm hmm. Good.

[End of Interview]